

## ATHANASIVS KIRCHER (1602-1680)

BY FRED BRAUEN

The year 1980 marked the tercentenary of the death of Athanasius Kircher, "berühmter Jesuite, Philosophus, und Mathematicus," founder of Egyptology,<sup>1</sup> of an important early museum,<sup>2</sup> and a precocious student of the archaeology of the Campagna,<sup>3</sup> who died in Rome on 27 November 1680 and was buried in the Gesù. Entering the order from German Jesuit Schools, Kircher pioneered in universal, pragmatic, and empirical scholarship, despite his ultimate appeal to revelation beyond reason.<sup>4</sup>

At the age of thirty he explored the crater of Vesuvius, and some years later John Evelyn (1620-1706), a future founder of the British Royal Society visiting Rome acknowledged Kircher's "many singular courtesies . . . in his own study where with Dutch patience he showed us his perpetual motions, catoptrics, magnetical experiments, models, and a thousand other crotchets and devices."<sup>5</sup> Evaluating his music studies, Bukofzer writes:

The two most impressive and typical books on musical speculation were written by two clerics and polyhistor: Mersenne (*Harmonie universelle*) and Kircher (*Musurgia universalis*) . . . in a truly encyclopedic and universal fashion. While the information they give cannot be accepted without many reservations their books nevertheless represent historical documents of the

<sup>1</sup> *The Oedipus Aegyptiacus* (Rome, 1652-54) in three folio volumes is the best known of Kircher's Egyptian-Coptic culture and language studies published from 1636 to 1676.

<sup>2</sup> The Museo Kircheriano of the Roman Jesuit Collegio, based on a personal collection bequeathed in 1650, and illustrated in Georg de Sepibus, *Romani Collegii Societatis Jesu Museum Celeberrimum* (Amsterdam, 1678). Sépi was Kircher's assistant in the collection; the donor, Alfonso Donnini, was *scrittore del popolo Romano*.

<sup>3</sup> Athanasius Kircher, *Latium* (Amsterdam, 1671).

<sup>4</sup> K. Schwartz (*Allgemeine Encyclopädie der Wissenschaften und Künste*, sec. 2, H-N, part 36 [Leipzig, 1884], 271) contended that a proper monograph would require an author conversant with Kircher's diverse fields of study. Various classified they include acoustics, archaeology, arithmetic, astronomy, chemistry, Egyptology, geography, geology, geometry, liturgy, magnetism, medicine, museology, optics, philology, philosophy, physics, and theology. See, for example, Pietro Tacchi Venturi, *Enciclopedia italiana*, 20 (1933), 209, and G. J. Rosenkranz, "Aus dem Leben des Jesuiten Athanasius Kircher 1602-1680," *Zeitschrift für vaterländische Geschichte und Alterthumskunde*, 13 (N. F. 3, 1852), 11. Hans Kangro (*Dictionary of Scientific Biography* [New York, 1973], VII, 376, see article on Kircher) opts for all under two heads: polymathy and dissemination of knowledge.

<sup>5</sup> *Diary and Correspondence of John Evelyn*, F. R. S., 6 vols. (London, 1878); I, 112-13; 388; See more recently, E. S. de Beer, ed., 6 vols. (London, 1956).

first order. They touch on all subjects of music, practical and theoretical, including solmization, temperament, and music history.<sup>6</sup>

Seeking common origins for mankind and attempting to derive all languages from one, Kircher believed people of every faith worshipped essentially the same god.<sup>7</sup>

A 1652 appreciation in currently fashionable adulatory verse by the Oxonian dilettante James Alban Gibbs, a Scots physician residing in Rome, exemplified the admiration of Kircher by his educated contemporaries, complimenting him on his recovery of the culture of "Ægypt, mother of arts" (specifically in restoring, with Bernini, the obelisk in Piazza Navona for Innocent X):

For their *Sphinx*

W'haue found an OEDIPVS, doth solue the links  
Of chayn'd mysterious emblemes, holy rites,  
Close riddles, obscure symbols; Ægypt's  
nights;  
Scarce hauing other darkenesse. KIRCHER's  
he,  
That whylome gaue a prooffe of masterie  
O're such concealed wisdomes, when the *Pile*  
He did expound of *Sothis*; held a vile,  
And lumpish masse before; not vnderstood,  
Till great PAMPHILIO's order made it good.  
Yea chang'd its name, and call'd it from his  
ovvne,  
With *golden gently Doue* resplendent shovvne.<sup>8</sup>

Kircher "war die Freude und Bewunderung der gelehrten Welt und der Abgott aller Grossen,"<sup>9</sup> including two emperors and six popes. The young

<sup>6</sup> Manfred Bukofzer, *Music in the Baroque Era* (New York, 1947), 390. A contrary view had been expressed by Charles Burney (*A General History of Music*, 1789; repr. London, 1935, I, 469; II, 459, 465, *et passim*). Having observed Kircher's indebtedness to Mersenne, Burney said that the *Musurgia* "is a huge book, but a much larger might be composed in pointing out its errors and absurdities." Bukofzer's favorable opinion is generally seconded today by George J. Buelow in an interesting essay in *The New Grove (Dictionary of Music and Musicians)*, ed. Stanley Sadie (London, 1980), X, 73-74.

<sup>7</sup> As in the *Arca Noe* (Amsterdam, 1675) and the *Turris Babel* (Amsterdam, 1679), with fantastic reconstructions of the Ark and the Tower.

<sup>8</sup> *Oedipus Aegyptiacus*, I, fol. ✠✠✠✠ 2.

<sup>9</sup> Rosenkranz, *op. cit.*, 56.

<sup>10</sup> The letter of 16 May 1670, published by Paul Friedländer ("Athanasius Kircher und Leibniz. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der Polyhistorie im XVII Jahrhundert," *Atti della Pontificia Accademia Romana di Archeologia*, 3° ser. *Rendiconti*, XIII [1937], 229-47), contains other similar honorifics. Leibniz, who had written at the same time to a Kircher pupil in Bohemia (letter lost and unknown), inquired about his work as well as about Grandami's compass and a fabric Kircher had once bought of an Arab in Marseille. Numerous Kircher letters have been published in various collections over the years and are noted in many of the bibliographies that appear often in the

Leibniz saluted him as *vir magne*,<sup>10</sup> although others called him “a scholarly windbag.”<sup>11</sup>

Some early eighteenth century literati, philologists, historians, and lexicographers, although less critical of his scientific work, his contagion theory, thermometer, acoustics, inventions, analytical and synthesizing polyglot and mathematical machines and tables, attacked Kircher's Egyptian and Oriental linguistics. They accused him of gullibility, error, ignorance, and filched ideas—Serpilius<sup>12</sup> collected various examples—and faulted him for crudity of language and for writing of lands he never visited. Mencke<sup>13</sup> enumerated hoaxes perpetrated at Kircher's expense, and Chevreau<sup>14</sup> adduced a Greek inscription that Kircher misidentified as Egyptian because it was found in Egypt. Morhof was an abrasive and persistent critic,<sup>15</sup> although Reimmann's criticism was more moderate.<sup>16</sup> Succeeding writers and encyclopedists, beginning with Johann Heinrich Zedler's important cyclopedia in sixty-eight volumes,<sup>17</sup> relied on such authorities and on

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articles on Kircher in encyclopedias and lexica published throughout the 18th and 19th centuries. The fourteen volumes of Kircher correspondence preserved in Rome include principally letters addressed to Kircher (see Friedländer's discussion). Some are available in copies at the Vatican Microfilm Library at St. Louis University, St. Louis, Missouri. John E. Fletcher, “A Brief Survey of the Unpublished correspondence of Athanasius Kircher, S. J. (1602-1680),” *Manuscripta*, 13, 3 (Nov. 1969), 150-60.

<sup>11</sup> Gottlieb Stolle, *Anleitung zur Historie der Gelahrheit* (Jena, 1724), 343-44, note “1.”

<sup>12</sup> Georg Serpilius, *Verzeichnüß einiger rarer Bücher* (Regensburg, 1723, II, iv, 207-37, citing many authors.

<sup>13</sup> Johann Burkhard Mencke, *Compendiöses gelehrten Lexikon* (Leipzig, 1715), col. 1054, and *Zwei Reden von der Charlatanerie oder Marcktschreyerey der Gelehrten* (Leipzig, 1727, from the Latin edition, with fresh notes), 102-04. The annotator supplies a further tale of Kircher gulled with meaningless or deceptive scribbles. However, Mencke, discussing *Gelehrten*—not charlatans—caught many still-respected figures in his widely-cast net. The most often quoted hoax is that of Andreas Müller (an Orientalist himself now considered “uncritical”) who sent a nonsensical scrawl of this own composing which Kircher explicated. The story is told, *inter alia*, by Mencke, *op. cit.*, col. 1094, article on Kircher, and Christian Gottlieb Jocher, *Allgemeines Gelehrten-Lexikon* (Leipzig, 1750), II, col. 2095-96, article on Kircher. But Müller's contemporary complimentary remarks about Kircher (e.g., “*vir merito celeberrimus*,” *Hebdomas observatonum de rebus sinicus* [Brandenburg, 1674], 3) are forgotten, as are similar remarks by others whose strictures alone are remembered.

<sup>14</sup> Urbain Chevreau, *Chevraeana, ou diverses pensées d'histoire, de critique, d'érudition et de morale*, II (Amsterdam, 1700), 173-74, compared with a similar inscription from Rome.

<sup>15</sup> Daniel Georg Morhof, *Polyhistor, Literarius, Philosophicus et Practicus*, 3rd ed. (Lübeck, 1732), vol. I-II, *passim*. Morhof also called Kircher “doctor of a hundred arts.” *Ibid.*, vol. I, lib. I, cap. V, sec. 41, 357.

<sup>16</sup> Jacob Friederich Reimmann, *Versuch eine Einleitung in der historiam literariam derer teutschen* (Halle, 1710), *passim*.

<sup>17</sup> *Grosses vollständiges universal Lexikon aller Wissenschaften und Künste*, XV (Halle-Leipzig, 1737), cols 755-58.

Kircher's autobiography with its marvelous rescues.<sup>18</sup> Dunkel<sup>19</sup> told a rare "absent-minded professor" anecdote: when a hat once fell on Kircher's head he supposed it was raining hats, although it was merely another's carried on a gale. Such frequently repeated stories, true or false, enlivened the sobriety of lengthy works, and may thereby have acquired exaggerated significance.

Kircher's elaborate hermetic and wholly ideographic hieroglyphic interpretations were discredited after the discovery (1799) and deciphering of the Rosetta Stone. Even the long eulogies of Kircher in exotic languages were thought gross conceits to awe lay audiences. The changing character of scholarship contributed to the decline of Kircher's prestige. The suppression of the Jesuit Order by papal decree in 1773 dealt a blow to the pursuit of universal knowledge which their schools had fostered, and enhanced awareness of the complexity of the universe gave rise to increasingly specialized learning. Adolf Erman's long and caustic appraisal, concentrating on Kircher's Egyptian-Oriental studies, described him as an unimportant but egotistical fabricator and mountebank, the scandal of academics whose significant work remained unpublished while he enjoyed fame and patronage.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Published by Kircher's pupil, Hieronymus Ambrosius Langenmantel, in his rare *Fasciculus epistolarum* (Augsburg, 1684) with forty-one Kircher letters, and in a German translation, A. Kircher, *Selbstbiographie aus dem lateinischen*, trans. Nikolaus Seng (Fulda, 1901). Kangro (*op. cit.*, 374-76) counsels reservations (cf. the witty Burney's remark about Kircher's "adopting whatever was offered to him, true or false, provided it contained anything marvelous." *op. cit.*) I, 99-100. See also Schwartz, *op. cit.*, 271, on the autobiography, the source of Kircher's early years.

<sup>19</sup> Johann Gottlob Dunkel, *Historisch critischen Nachrichten von verstorbenen Gelehrten und deren Schriften*, III, no. 2884 (Cöthen-Dessau, 1760) 792.

<sup>20</sup> *Deutsche allgemeine Biographie*, XVI (Leipzig, 1882), 1-4. Schwartz's life and bibliography (*cit.*, sec. 2, part 36, 266-71) is long and, like many encyclopedia articles, uncritical, less perspicacious, and much more sympathetic, calling Kircher's works more *combinatorisch* than critical. Schwartz believes Kircher's many errors and deceptions accompany his lively imagination. Although Kircher's work is now generally without historical value, Champollion acknowledged his debt to it. Jean François Champollion, fils, *Grammaire Égyptienne, ou principes généraux de l'écriture sacrée égyptienne* (Paris, 1836), viii, ix. Champollion concedes that despite numerous errors, Kircher contributed much to spreading the study of the Coptic language, as long as he was able to rid himself of "son charlatanerie habituel." What Champollion is left with seems a grudging compliment as he acknowledges Kircher's contribution only to bring others' work to wider attention, without any positive statement of his own; in fact, Champollion repeats the old accusation that Kircher manufactured terms to suit his needs: "il osa introduire dans ce lexique, et donner comme coptes, plusieurs [not only one or two] mots dont il avait besoin pour appuyer ses explications imaginaires." Moreover, Kircher's writings were listed in *extenso* in the *Universal Catalogue of Books on Art*, a useful bibliography of the Science and Art Department of the Council of Education of the present Victoria & Albert Museum (London, 1870), I, pt. 2, 223-25. An extensive bibliography also appeared in the Jesuit *Bibliothèque de la Compagnie de Jésus. Bibliographie*, IV (Brussels & Paris, 1893), cols. 1046-77.

His long Latin disquisitions, with rare fonts and copious illustrations, as passé as Kircher's scholarship, retained few defenders.

Twentieth-century criticism, however, has been more tolerant, no longer demanding of Kircher a faultless command which is now regarded as unattainable. Publication of Kircher's works in an estimated seventy-two volumes has been announced,<sup>21</sup> and in recent years specialists have been examining narrower aspects of his career.<sup>22</sup> A comprehensive, dispassionate,

<sup>21</sup> *Meyers enzyklopädisches Lexikon*, 9th ed. (Mannheim, 1975), XIII, 713-14.

<sup>22</sup> The modern literature is scattered, albeit growing slowly. Among other 20th-century works I have consulted the following:

John Ferguson, *Bibliotheca chemica* (Glasgow, 1906; repr. London, 1954), I, 466-68. Catalog of a private library.

Julius von Schlosser, *Kunst- und Wunderkammer der Spät-Renaissance* (Leipzig, 1908), 104-05. Reproduces Sépi's 1678 engraved view of the Kircherianum (n. 2, *supra*).

Robert M. Haas, *Die Musik des Parocks* (Vienna, 1928), 174-7. Quotes a Kircher aria dedicated to his patron, Ferdinand III.

Paul Burg-Schaumburg, *Minerva Lexikon berühmter Persönlichkeiten aller Zeitalter* (Leipzig, 1929), 320. Prof. Burg's entry, the nadir of Kircher criticism, supplies neither Kircher's given name nor his qualifications as *berühmte Persönlichkeit*: "Kircher, a Jesuit, suffered great perils in his youth. Once almost ground beneath a mill-wheel, he escaped injury again when a troop of colts galloped over him. In gratitude he devoted himself to serving his god, becoming a most learned man, highly regarded by the mighty."

Pietro Tacchi Venturi and Robert Alagia, in *Enc. it.*, XX (1933), 209.

Torrey, Harry, "Athanasius Kircher and the progress of medicine," *Osiris*, 5 (1938), 246-75. A sober, skeptical historian concludes: "He contributed no well-authenticated observation to microbiology or the history of infectious disease. He established no useful generalization. He made no stimulating suggestions for research. In his own times, he belonged to the past. . . ."

Major, Ralph H., "Athanasius Kircher" *Annals of Medical History*, 3 ser., I (Mar. 1939), 105-20. A medical man's cautious evaluation that Kircher "propounded the germ theory of disease . . . from observation. This assures him immortality."

Fussing, Hans H., "Thomas Rasmussen Walgensten," *Dansk biografisk leksikon* (Copenhagen, 1943), XXV, 57-58, asserts that this Danish physicist was the first to construct a *laterna magica*, a priority accepted by Kangro on G. B. della Porta's principle, and not by Kircher as once thought.

George E. McCracken, "Athanasius Kircher's *Universal Polygraphy*," *Isis*, 39 (Nov. 1948), 215-28.

Ruth Halle Owen, *Early Chamber Music* (New York, 1949), 10, 83. Kircher as authority on *symphonic stylus* of chamber music, and on the string quartet.

A. Wolf, *a history of Science, Technology and Philosophy in the 16th & 17th Centuries*, 2d ed. (London 1950), *passim*.

Boleslaw Szczesniak, "Athanasius Kircher's *China Illustrata*," *Osiris*, 10 (1952), 384-411.

Erik Iversen, *The Myth of Egypt and Its Hieroglyphics in the European Tradition* (Copenhagen, 1961).

Conor Reilly, "Athanasius Kircher, S. J.: Master of a Hundred Arts," *The Month*, 29 (Jan. 1963), 20-29, one of several similarly titled publications. Of that in the *Dublin Studies*, 44 (1955), 457-68, Kangro notes it is not always accurate, and is based on a distorted view of 17th-century Germany. (*Op. cit.*, 377.)

and objective study of this imposing, controversial, sometimes dubious but always serious, rich, complex, and interesting figure, without the bias of detractors or apologists, seems due in order to identify and assess his contributions to knowledge.<sup>23</sup> He should be judged in relation to his own time, recognizing changes in scholarly procedures and ethics.

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Rudolf Wittkower, *Gian Lorenzo Bernini, the Sculptor of the Roman Baroque* (London, 1966), 219-20, n. 50; 247-48, n. 71; 31.

University of St. Thomas (Houston). *Builders and Humanists: The Renaissance Popes as Patrons of the Arts* (1966), 119, 331, 344. Brief, but interesting, comments on Kircher's work and books.

Rolf Dammann, *Der Musikbegriff im deutscher Barock* (Cologne, 1967), 273. On *affekt* and Kircher's interest in the phenomenon of music.

Jurgis Baltrušaitis, *La quête d'Isis: introduction à l'Egyptomanie* (Paris, 1967). Numerous references to, and reproductions from Kircher's Egyptian studies.

Mario Emilio Cosenza, *Checklist of Non-Italian Humanists 1300-1800* (Boston, 1969), 150, for including Kircher in the category of humanists.

Don Cameron Allen, *Mysteriously Meant: The Rediscovery of Pagan Symbolism and Allegorical Interpretation in the Renaissance* (Baltimore, 1970).

Magda Whitrow, ed., *Isis Cumulative Bibliography 1913-65*, vol. 2, pt. 1 (London, 1971), 21.

Rudolf Wittkower and Irma B. Jaffe, eds., *Baroque Art: The Jesuit Contribution* (New York, 1972), especially René Taylor, "Hermetism and Mystical Architecture in the Society of Jesus" from the Fordham symposium.

Hans Kangro, in *Dict. of Scientific Biography* (New York, 1973), VII, 374-76. Short but a valuable and critical modern paper, comprehending Kircher's activity in two heads: "polymathy and dissemination of knowledge."

Fritz Krafft, in *Neue deutsche Biographie* of the *Historische Kommission bei der bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften* (Berlin, 1977), XI, 641-45. Useful modern statement and bibliography.

Jurgis Baltrušaitis, *Le miroir* (Paris, 1978). Several references to Kircher and his pupil, Caspar Schott, in a quasi-mystical work. I thank Prof. Edgar Kaufmann, Jr., for this reference.

Joscelyn Godwin, *Athanasius Kircher: A Renaissance Man and the Quest for Lost Knowledge* (London, 1979). Useful biography; extensive bibliography of writings by and about Kircher; and many unusual plates from his works in the current picture-book fashion.

<sup>23</sup> After reciting the story—told always with slight differences—of the stone buried in Rome and covered with drawings and lines in order to expose Kircher when it was opportunely found later, the *New and General Biographic Dictionary*, (London, new ed., 1784), III, 39-40, comments that "if this story is not true there is no doubt that it might have been; and if Kircher had been made a dupe in the science of antiques, so have ten thousand beside him. The making of antiques is a trade which has been constantly practised in all ages. . . ." Fritz Krafft recently observed that "Naturforschung ist für Kircher, wie für viele seine Zeitgenossen kein Selbstzweck, sondern Erkenntnis der Vollkommenheit Gottes," *op. cit.*, XI, 643; cf. on this point Andrew D. White, *A History of the Warfare of Science with Theology in Christendom* (New York, 1896), recently reprinted.

Some claims made for Kircher's scientific investigations or inventions have been discredited; some are difficult to evaluate convincingly by modern standards, for it is impossible to determine precisely what he saw through his microscope.